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THE TEMPLE OF THE SIRENS IN THE SORREN-
TINE PENINSULA

ONE of the most widely discussed questions — perhaps the most extensively treated question connected with the Sorrentine peninsula — is that of the location of the Temple of the Sirens. The ancients mentioned it as a sanctuary ardently revered by the neighboring people, and also spoke of the *ἀναθήματα παλαιά* which were to be seen there. This last information is afforded by Strabo (V, p. 247 C.), but a comparison of the text of Strabo (cf. also I, p. 22 C.) with that of the Pseudo-Aristotle (*De Mirab. Ausc.* 103; cf. also Steph. Byz. s.v. *Σειρήνουσσαι*) shows that the common source was the celebrated Italiote historian Timaeus of Tauromenium, the learned and diligent compiler of the traditions of the Greeks of the West. The temple, as appears from Strabo, was located in the vicinity of Sorrento, but the precise site has never been discovered. Some scholars, like the Neapolitan topographer B. Capasso, have thought of it as situated between Massa Lubrense and the present Sorrento; others, like Professor J. Beloch, have thought rather of the village of Massa Lubrense itself as its site. This place gets its name from having been the *mansio* of the *delubrum* chiefly venerated in the region, obviously the *delubrum* of the Sirens, from which, as is well known, come the names both of the mountain overlooking Massa and of the islands near the Punta di Campanella (*promunturium Minervae*).¹ The ancients supposed that the Sirens had the form of birds; even to-day the islands where it

¹ Capasso, *Memorie storiche archeologiche della Penisola Sorrentina*, Naples, 1846. Beloch, *Campanien*, p. 276.

was supposed the Sirens gloated over the bones of mariners are called *Li galli*, 'the cocks.'

Last year, having had occasion to examine carefully for historical and archaeological purposes various parts of the peninsula, I turned my attention to the problem of the topography of the temple, and my researches had a rather happy result, as I was so successful as to find at a stonecutter's shop

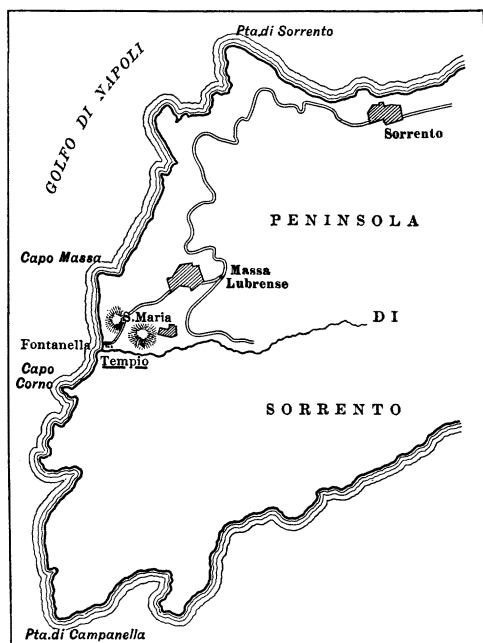


FIGURE 1.—THE COAST BETWEEN SORRENTO AND THE PUNTA DI CAMPANELLA.

the extremely important marble fragment reproduced in Fig. 2. The head at once impresses us either as an original of the beginning of the fifth century B.C. or as a copy of a work of that period. Certain stylistic reasons make for one of the two opinions, others for the other. The solution can be reached only by a careful examination of the monument at first hand. In any case it was useful to know the place of discov-

ery. But to find out exactly where monuments are discovered is a most difficult problem in Italy. The villager, no less than the landowner, is still under the distressing influence of the old fiscal laws which made all kinds of trouble for any one who stumbled upon antiquities or drove a trade in them. Though the new law is far more liberal in theory, it cannot for administrative reasons be immediately applied. Moreover, it takes time before the memory of the past can be extinguished and people

can accustom themselves to the new state of affairs. Concealing my function as Director of the Museum of Naples and of the excavations of Pompeii, after minute inquiry made personally and on the spot, and thanks to the aid of Mr. Almerico Gargicello of Sorrento and of Fr. S. Astarita of Massa Lubrense, I succeeded in getting the following information, which is not to be found in the official *Notizie degli Scavi*.

Some years ago—it was impossible to ascertain the exact date—one Caselli, a contractor, built the new road which leads from the region of Massa Lubrense to the seashore, or rather to the territory of Fontanella. Here, on the slope of an embankment, quite near the mediaeval church of Fontanella, on the estate of Canon Luigi Rocco, were found various fragments of columns and statues which, appropriated by different people, soon found their way partly to Sorrento and partly to Rome and perhaps elsewhere. It is said that among the objects found there were two columns of ancient *rosso antico*. Certainly there were found objects belonging to the Roman age, as I was able to verify by inspecting the fragments which had been brought to the Hôtel Victoria at Sorrento. And from the abundance of evidence collected on the spot I got the impression that the remains of a temple had lain there.

This is rendered more than probable by the fact that the still visible ruins of the mediaeval building of Fontanella (which are adjacent to the place where the ancient marbles were found—and among them the archaic head shown in Fig. 2) belong to a church that was originally the home of the cult of Santa Maria, which in the sixteenth century was transferred to the still surviving church of Santa Maria della Lobbra (derived from the Latin *delubrum*). These ruins are, in brief, in a part of the village of Massa Lubrense, and moreover on a hill situated between Massa Lubrense and the sea-coast, precisely where the remains of the church of Fontanella are to be found.

The church of Fontanella, where once a year even now sacred ceremonies are held in memory of the ancient seat of

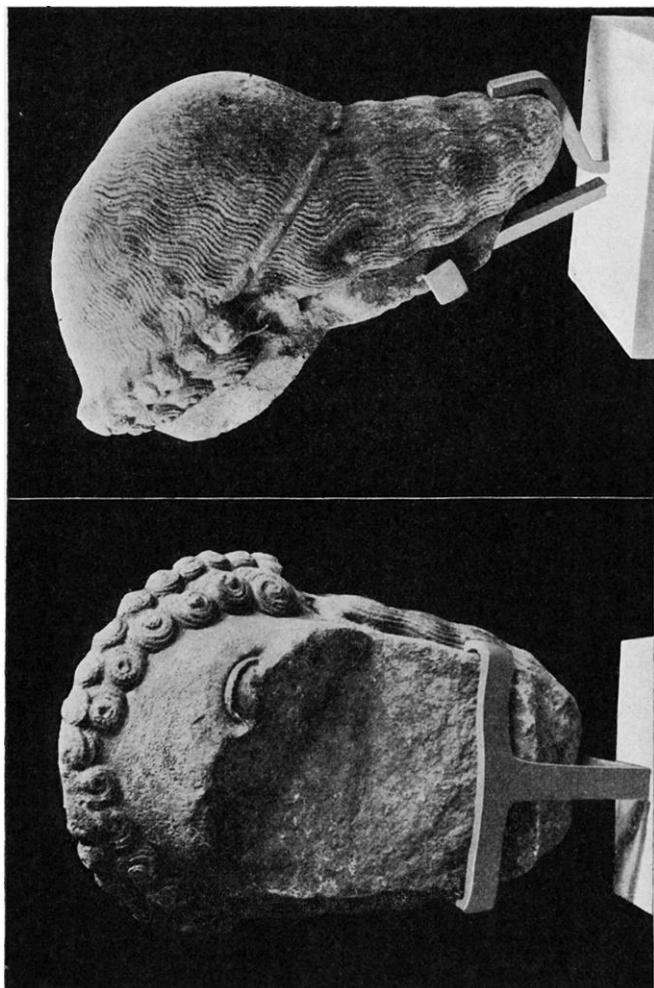


FIGURE 2. — MARBLE FRAGMENT PROBABLY FROM THE TEMPLE OF THE SIRENS IN THE
SORRENTINE PENINSULA.

Christian worship, would thus seem to have been the successor of an ancient Graeco-Roman temple, that is, the temple of the Sirens.

The cult of the Sirens was occasioned by the great obstacles presented by the navigation of the straits between Capri and the mainland — obstacles occasionally referred to by the Italian writers of the Middle Ages. Hence it is readily understood how those fearful of shipwreck held the tutelary divinities of these dangerous places in great reverence. On examining the configuration of the coast near the Punta di Campanella, and of the steep precipices which succeed as one approaches Sorrento, it will be seen that the first harbor which could offer any security and relief to the mariner was precisely the little port between Cape Corno and Cape Massa, that is to say, the place where we find the ruins of the church of Santa Maria della Fontanella, the cult of which later passed on to the neighboring church of Santa Maria della Lobbra. From the book of Serafino Montorio (*Zodaico di Maria*, 1713, p. 199¹) we learn that at the festival of Santa Maria della Lobbra, rites used to be performed which remind one of those which the ancients must have accorded the Sirens. The cult of Santa Maria della Lobbra was very important in this region in the past, and the sailors who departed from what is now the shore near Fontanella, on arriving at Cape Corno, saluted the little church “with the firing of mortars and arquebusses,” and were answered “by the sound of the bells of the church.”

From all that has been said it would seem possible to conclude that the marble fragment shown in Fig. 2 really belongs to the temple of the Sirens, which, as we have seen, was located on a hill near the seashore at Fontanella, in the vicinity of the village of Massa Lubrense, and a little beyond the modern church of Santa Maria della Lobbra or St. Mary of the *delubrum*.

This monument has all the characteristics of Greek archaic work. But is it a copy of a monument of the beginning of the

¹ I saw a mutilated copy in which I had no means of finding the name of the city in which it was printed.

fifth century? Is it one of those ἀναθήματα παλαιά of which Timaeus spoke, or was it placed subsequently in the temple of the Sirens, being merely a copy of a statue which was in existence there from the fifth and sixth centuries when the Greeks of Sicily colonized Sorrento?¹ This is a question which the archaeologists in art have to solve. For my part I have confined myself to observing that the discovery of this monument justifies us in believing that we have solved the disputed problem of the topography of the temple. The marble fragment was presented by me to the National Museum of Naples, where any one may study at his leisure those characteristics which tend to determine whether it is really an archaic work or an ancient copy of a monument of the archaic period.

ETTORE PAIS.

¹ Diod. V, 7; Eust. *ad Dion. Perieg.* vv. 461, 476.